

## *From Ford, only sullen silence as crisis escalates*

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### **Body**

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If there is a climate emergency on planet Earth, it appears to have gone unnoticed in Doug Ford's Ontario.

In Glasgow this month, the world's politicians tried hard to be heard at the COP26 summit, eking out an agreement to keep lowering greenhouse gas emissions.

In Ottawa this week, Parliament reopened with a declaration that "our Earth is in danger." Fresh from COP26, Environment Minister Steven Guilbeault, a lifelong climate activist newly appointed to the role, raised expectations that his federal Liberals are finally serious after campaigning on ambitious carbon reduction targets.

But at Queen's Park, there are no such earth-shaking declarations. Nor earth-saving expectations.

On global warming, the premier is sullen and his minister silent: David Piccini took over the provincial environment portfolio last summer, but in Glasgow he went unheard - not a quote, not a tweet, not a peep.

All that said - or unsaid - the rookie minister's decision to lie low might be an improvement over the Ford government's past stands. Piccini's predecessors stood in the way of preservation, pushing back against environment groups and fighting hard against the federal government.

Now, Ottawa is raising its game while Ontario is going back in time. It wasn't always so.

Former Progressive Conservative premier Bill Davis created the country's first Environment Ministry, protected the Niagara escarpment and cancelled the proposed Spadina Expressway. Ex-premier Dalton McGuinty's Liberal government eliminated coal-fired power plants and established the greenbelt.

The Ford government's legacy?

It went to court to mount a double-barrelled fight against the federal government - first by opposing a national carbon levy with a \$30-million war chest, then by imposing "anti-tax" stickers at all gas pumps. In both cases, judges ruled against the province.

Ford also dropped the words "climate change" from the ministry's title when he came to power. Instead of addressing the future and present risk of global warming, the premier went retro by calling it the Ministry of Environment, Conservation and Parks.

This week, Ford's Tories had their wrists slapped by the provincial auditor for failing to safeguard against toxic spills, while relying on ministerial fiat to bypass environmental assessments. Still, the government got off lightly - in reality, much of the auditor's annual report recapped past media revelations.

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Two years ago, Ford undercut outside scrutiny by eliminating the independent environmental commissioner's office that had been in place since 1994. He handed off final environmental responsibility to the province's chief bean counter (who has long been accused of bias against renewable energy and cap and trade by exasperated environmental groups).

On environmental matters, Ford does as he pleases and undoes those who displease him. That's in sharp contrast to his federal counterparts, who faced firm but fair criticism from their full-fledged and fully independent environmental watchdog in Thursday's annual report.

At Queen's Park, criticism is muzzled and talking points are amplified. Upon his return from this month's global warming summit, Piccini found his provincial voice - offering a hollow boast that Ontario is perfectly positioned to meet its carbon reduction targets.

"Let's talk about the truth," Piccini lectured the opposition in the legislature. "Ontario is the only province in this nation on track to meet our (greenhouse gas) reduction targets by 2030."

What he didn't say is how the province got there - thanks to the heavy lifting of phasing out heavily-polluting coal plants by the previous McGuinty government.

"That's because we shut down coal," one Liberal heckler reminded Piccini.

The Liberal lament seems ever more plaintive these days because the party that was once ahead of the curve provincially has lost traction on the environment. Beyond rebates for electric vehicles, party leader Steven Del Duca hasn't had anything interesting to say on global warming since taking over last year.

NDP Leader Andrea Horwath, outflanked by the Liberals for years, is now making up lost ground. She released the party's environmental platform, the Green New Democratic Deal, last March.

The NDP would "restore the full and independent powers of the environmental commissioner, and empower them with clear oversight powers ... to keep us on track in our goal to achieve our emission reduction targets." All new vehicles sold in Ontario would have to be electric by 2035, as part of the NDP target for net-zero carbon emissions in 2050.

But it's fair to say that on environmental matters, most of the legislature's 124 members are overshadowed by Green Leader Mike Schreiner. The party's lone MPP seems destined for re-election in his Guelph riding, but is also campaigning hard to help his new deputy leader, Dianne Saxe, win Toronto's University-Rosedale riding.

If she won a seat, the new Green MPP would not only be a formidable presence but a form of poetic justice: Saxe was the province's last independent environmental commissioner until Ford's Tories silenced her voice in 2019.

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